

PRESIDENT JONATHAN NEZ
VICE PRESIDENT MYRON LIZER



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Presented to the
24TH NAVAJO NATION
COUNCIL

STATE OF THE
NAVAJO NATION ADDRESS

President
Jonathan Nez
and
Vice President
Myron Lizer



Yáát'ééh to the honorable members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, Speaker Seth Damon, Chief Justice JoAnn B. Jayne, as well as chapter, county, state, and federal leaders, and most importantly our Diné Citizens. On behalf of the Nez-Lizer Administration, we are pleased to present to you the State of the Navajo Nation Address for the 2021 Winter Council Session.

First, we want to thank all of the members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council for your leadership and support, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we move forward in the New Year, we continue to pray for our Navajo people, health care workers, first responders, and all of our leaders of the Navajo Nation and at the state, county, and federal levels. On January 6th, our Nation swore in new and returning leaders at the chapter level. We congratulate them and their families and we pray that they will be able to move their communities forward and empower our people at the local level.

We must also recognize the recent historical and groundbreaking elections and appointments of Native American women including the nomination of the Honorable Deb Haaland to serve as the next Secretary of the Interior, the appointment of Wahleah Johns to serve as the Director of Indian Energy with the U.S. Department of Energy, Christina Haswood who is the very first member of the Navajo Nation elected to serve in the Kansas State Legislature with the House of Representatives, Deborah Ann Begay who is the first Native American to serve as Justice of the Peace for Moon Valley in Maricopa County in Arizona. We are very proud and excited as they begin their service in the coming years. Our administration has put forth more recommendations for our Navajo people to serve within the Biden-Harris Administration.

In the New Year, our administration looks to continue mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic and continue the process of protecting and healing our Navajo people, but we must also continue to plan for the long-term and re-focus on initiatives that were set aside due to the pandemic. In order to move forward on many of these initiatives we must work together with all leadership at every level. With the Biden-Harris Administration taking office, we look forward to continuing our dialogue with President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and their cabinet members.

In a meeting with President Biden and Vice President Harris in October 2020, our administration spoke about the importance of working together on issues related to infrastructure development projects to provide clean water, electricity, broadband, and roads for more Navajo people, and the need to improve the health care system to resolve health disparities, support for economic development, restoring and expanding the Bears Ears National Monument, educational priorities, remediating uranium mining sites, water rights settlements, solid waste management, and improving public safety. Our administration will remain engaged with the Biden-

Harris Administration to advance these priorities, and many others, for the benefit of the Navajo people.

314 days have passed since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on the Navajo Nation. Since then, there have been 27,484 confirmed cases and sadly, we have lost 973 of our Navajo people, including our mothers, fathers, grandparents, first responders, health care workers, teachers, leaders, and many more. To all of our people who have lost loved ones, we offer our prayers and condolences. We ask for strength and we hope that they will take comfort in knowing that their loved ones are now in the hands of our Creator.

Throughout this pandemic, our health care workers, first responders, spiritual leaders, teachers, parents, Navajo Nation employees, and many others have demonstrated unwavering determination to help our people in many ways. Their strength and resilience are what inspires us as leaders. They are the reason why we are filled with hope and optimism for the future of our Nation. Although we are still faced with many unprecedented challenges, we are cautiously optimistic that the worst of this pandemic is behind us, but we also acknowledge that the impacts and devastation remain and that the process of healing will take time.

We thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council for all of the support and guidance that you have provided during this pandemic. Each of you have spent long hours considering legislations and debating many issues and matters related to COVID-19 and helping our people, while also caring for your families and loved ones. Despite some setbacks and differing views on issues, we have managed to work together to allocate and spend down the \$714 million in CARES Act funds that our Nation received. While this process has been challenging and very time consuming, we have many success stories and progress continues to be made.

Thanks to the commitment and hard work of Navajo Tribal Utility Authority, 719 Navajo families now have electricity to help provide basic amenities that not only improve their quality of life, but also help to keep them safe during the pandemic. We take this opportunity to recognize and thank General Manager Walter Haase, Deputy General Manager Rex Kontz, and the hundreds of men and women on the ground who continue to work through the cold winter weather to complete CARES Act funded projects. They have worked 10-hour days, including weekends and most holidays to expedite the completion of projects. NTUA continues to work toward the installation of as many as 300 off-grid solar units for Navajo residents, including 40 for Navajo veterans.

They have also partnered with Navajo Engineering and Construction Authority and Navajo-owned private businesses to install 104 water cistern systems, 77 septic tanks, and 53 bathroom additions, and completed 30 water line extensions for some of our people that are most in need of these basic amenities. A total of 64 pump and motor replacements for water wells has been completed in many communities and three new water wells have also been completed recently.

NTUA has also worked closely with the Navajo Nation Telecommunications Regulatory Commission Office, under Executive Director Christopher Becenti, to complete new and upgraded towers to provide increased broadband and cell phone access in the communities of Pinedale, N.M., Chinle, Arizona, Summit East and Woodsprings in Arizona, and they are near completion of another in Beclabito, N.M. We appreciate the partnerships and collaboration that it took to complete these projects. Progress continues with remaining utility projects.

These are CARES Act funded projects that will provide long-term benefits for families and our communities. As the litigation over the remaining CARES Act funds continues in the U.S. Supreme Court, we are optimistic that the Navajo Nation Department of Justice, under Attorney General Doreen N. McPaul and Deputy Attorney General Kimberly Dutcher, will be able to secure more funds that rightfully belong to tribes. We hope to see more of these funds used for infrastructure projects. We also seek to streamline our internal processes to use the funds in a timely manner.

As we continue on in this pandemic, we must also acknowledge the commitment and dedication of all Navajo Nation employees, including those who have taken on more responsibilities and duties to help lead the pandemic response efforts within the Navajo Health Command Operations Center, under the leadership of Navajo Department of Health Executive Director Dr. Jill Jim, who was selected to serve on the Biden-Harris COVID-19 Advisory Board in late November. We congratulate Dr. Jim and thank her for the commitment and dedication that she has exemplified throughout the pandemic.

Our administration is currently developing a proposal for the Council's consideration to provide hazard duty/special duty pay to employees of the Nation's enterprises and more Navajo Nation employees for their tireless work during the pandemic, using funds from the Personnel Lapse Fund that were previously line item vetoed in the Comprehensive Budget.

The guidance that we, as leaders, receive is based on data and the daily advice provided by our public health experts. Before we had a single confirmed case of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation, our administration moved forward with establishing the COVID-19 Preparedness Team to monitor, plan, prepare, and coordinate efforts to mitigate and address the pandemic. We immediately began a public outreach effort to alert our people about the risks of COVID-19, and also to offer advice on how to prepare and prevent the spread of the virus. To this day, we continue to hold online town hall updates twice a week, along with frequent updates on radio, social media, newspapers, billboards, televisions, newsletters, weekly health advisories, and other means. We also established a Unified Command Group to work together with our federal partners such as FEMA, and others to provide daily updates inclusive of the Legislative and Judicial Branches. This swift action from the Navajo Nation and its partners have saved lives and helped mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the use of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines in December, we are seeing great progress with the administering of COVID-19 vaccines for our health care workers, first responders, our elders, spiritual leaders, essential workers, and many others. So far, the Navajo Nation has received 49,700 doses on both vaccines, and approximately half of those doses have been administered. With the 57-hour weekend lockdowns lifted, health care facilities will begin holding more vaccine drives on weekends to help protect more of our people.

We recognize that there is overwhelming demand for the vaccines across the country and worldwide, and that it will take several more months to make the vaccine available to the general public on a wider scale. We have visited several vaccine sites in the communities of Thoreau, N.M., Chinle, AZ, Fort Defiance, AZ, Shiprock, N.M., Kayenta, AZ, Pinon, AZ, and Tuba City, AZ to thank the Navajo Area IHS and tribal health facility workers and to show support for our elders as they receive the initial dose of the vaccines. The outreach and information that has been distributed by the health care facilities, our administration, and others has helped tremendously to answer questions and calm concerns over the safety of the vaccines.

Through the collaboration of the Navajo Department of Health, Navajo Area Indian Health Service, and others we are seeing great success thus far. We will continue to advocate for more doses of the vaccines. We applaud the health care facilities and the health care workers for getting the doses into the arms of our people, they are truly frontline warriors. Our administration also takes this opportunity to recognize and thank Rear Adm. Michael Weahkee, former Director of IHS, for his service and we wish him the best as he moves forward.

In regards to the CARES Act Hardship Assistance Program, we thank the Office of the Controller and all of their employees for their long hours of hard work over the last several months to oversee and administer this program and the expenditure of the CARES Act dollars. We can all agree that everyone could have done a better job with implementing this program and communicating with our people, but now it is time to move forward and encourage our Navajo people to use the hardship funds for the purpose that it is intended for, to provide essential items and services for families during the COVID-19 pandemic. We ask our people to remain patient as the checks are mailed and delivered in the coming days and weeks. The Health Command Operations Center recommended that the checks be issued in waves to minimize large gatherings and traveling.

Our numbers of new COVID-19 cases are flattening, and we do not want to have another surge. Please remember that we are still in the midst of the pandemic, so we have to remain cautious. We strongly advise everyone to avoid traveling to border towns and putting yourselves at risk of COVID-19. Stay local, stay safe.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Navajo Nation Board of Education, Department of Diné Education, and our administration have consistently supported and advocated for all schools on the Navajo Nation to implement and continue with online schooling in order to protect our students, teachers, and all school employees from the virus. We also appreciate the adoption of this position by the members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council early on in the pandemic.

Together, we must continue to urge all schools to continue with online learning including states, neighboring counties, and other school boards that have many of our Navajo students enrolled. We have already lost some of our precious educators to COVID-19, and we cannot let it continue. The health and safety of our children, teachers, and school employees should not be subject to politics or any other priorities of others.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also taken its toll on our Navajo business owners and Navajo Nation Enterprises. With the support of the 24th Navajo Nation Council and the leadership of Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development Executive Director JT Willie and his staff, the Navajo Nation was able to provide over \$29 million in CARES Act funds to 4,372 business owners and artisans for much needed relief. In the weeks and months ahead, the Nez-Lizer Administration's Economic Recovery Workgroup led by Vice President Lizer, continues to work to develop paths to recovery for businesses that were financially impacted by the pandemic.

We commend the Navajo Nation Enterprises who have contributed financially, with humanitarian efforts, and personnel to help our people and our communities. We also recognize that the Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise is facing many challenges created by the pandemic and we thank their board for everything they have done to support their employees for as long as possible. Our administration approved approximately \$25 million to support the Gaming Enterprise and their employees and also put forth another proposal to provide more resources. Unfortunately, that proposal did not move forward in the legislative process. With the closure of Navajo Generating Station, the ongoing pandemic, and other factors, our Nation is in a very tough financial state, which makes it very difficult to provide additional financial support. However, we continue to discuss options with the Council and others and we hope to put forth another proposal soon to support our enterprises.

When it comes to our Nation's revenue and funding sources, our administration has always cautioned against overspending, especially when it involves our Nation's trust funds, Unreserved, Undesignated Fund Balance, and the Síhasin Fund. As of November 30, 2020, the Office of the Controller reported that the current balance of the Síhasin Fund is approximately \$426 million. There is currently a proposal, through Resolution CJA-01-21, which requests over \$63 million from the Síhasin Fund for heavy equipment purchases for chapters, water projects, and other capital projects. While our administration has not made a final decision for this proposal, we strongly urge all of our leaders to carefully consider the long-term needs, uncertain revenue projections, and many other factors when considering large spending packages.

Looking back on the last several months, the Navajo Nation has several major accomplishments to be proud of including the final passage and signing of the Navajo Utah Water Rights Settlement Act by Congress and former President Trump. While it did not create many headlines, this is a remarkable and historic achievement for the Navajo people of the State of Utah and all of the leaders who have worked toward this settlement for over 15 years.

Our administration looks forward to continuing the next steps to fulfill the settlement to finally bring much-needed clean water to our Navajo people in Utah. We thank former Utah Governor Gary R. Herbert, new Utah Governor Spencer Cox, Senator Mitt Romney, Congressmen Rob Bishop, Ben McAdams, former Senators Tom Udall and Martha McSally, the Navajo

Nation Washington Office under the leadership of Executive Director Santee Lewis, and many others involved in this great achievement for our Nation.

At the federal level, the Navajo Nation was also successful in advocating for a three-year reauthorization of the Special Diabetes Program for Indians, to help combat the growing epidemic of diabetes among Native Americans by providing funding for treatment and prevention. The Navajo Nation has benefitted greatly from the success of the Special Diabetes Program. The three-year reauthorization is a great achievement, but we will continue to advocate for a permanent extension with increased funding.

In another effort to combat diabetes, we thank the 24th Navajo Nation Council for supporting the reauthorization of the Healthy Diné Nation Act that allows for the continuation of the two-percent sales tax on unhealthy foods and beverages to funds community-based wellness projects to promote healthy living among our Navajo people. Our administration signed the reauthorization into law on December 31, 2020. Since the establishment of the sales tax in 2014, the tax revenues have benefitted many of our communities with the construction of new walking trails, basketball courts, and other projects designed to promote active living. This historic achievement was a grassroots driven initiative and we thank all of the health and community advocates who devoted their time and resources. This will also help to strengthen our bodies and immune systems to help fight COVID-19 and other viruses.

The Navajo Nation Division of Transportation, under Executive Director Garret Silversmith, has made great progress in recent months with road projects including the replacement of asphalt to damaged pavement on Navajo Route 57 in Gad'iiahi/To'Koi, N.M and the reinforcement of the low water crossing on N6730 near Black Falls in Tolani Lake, AZ. Ongoing projects include the bridge construction and widening/paving of a 10-mile stretch of Navajo Route 12 in Tsaile/Wheatfields, and the replacement of the bridge along N9402 in Lupton, AZ, and the pavement of Navajo Route 27 between Nazlini, AZ and Chinle, AZ. These are a few of the ongoing projects, which are also creating jobs for Navajo-owned businesses, tax revenue, and stronger infrastructure within our communities.

On January 2, 2021, the Navajo Police Training Academy graduated eight newly commissioned police officers, which increases the presence of officers in our communities. The new officers are Aaron C. Brown, Klyton Belone, Ryan Draper, Vanecia Valenzuela, Arrow Dosela, Henry Antonio, Jr., Nathaniel K. Watson, and Jasmine Peaches. They have since been assigned to the Window Rock, Chinle, Crownpoint, and Kayenta Police Districts. We congratulate Class 55 and wish them the very best. With 195 officers serving our large land base, it is imperative that we continue to advocate for more funding and resource to help law enforcement.

We also thank Navajo Nation Division of Public Safety Executive Director Jesse Delmar and Police Chief Phillip B. Francisco for their dedication to serve and protect our Navajo people and communities. Under their leadership, the Division of Public Safety continues to develop the Missing Persons Unit, to dedicate full-time personnel and funds to help locate and return our Navajo relatives to their families. This is a crucial component to address the missing and murdered Diné relatives epidemic and to provide justice to those who are missing their loved ones.

Over the last several months, Navajo Veterans Administration Executive Director James D. Zwierlein has put together a plan to establish a housing manufacturing facility to construct homes for our Navajo people. The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the need for more homes for Navajo families. Recently, we presented the plan to the members of the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission and we continue to seek the support of more Council members to provide funding and to approve uniform building codes for new facilities, to operate the first housing manufacturing facility and begin building homes. We will soon present this proposal to the Council for consideration.

We appreciate the support and approval of the 24th Navajo Nation Council of \$2.5 million for the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Aid to provide scholarship funds for Navajo students through the Higher Education Program, until we receive funds from the Department of the Interior. In 2019, a total of 13,269 students submitted applications. Unfortunately, the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Aid was only able to fund for approximately half of the applicants due to limited funding.

Recently, the Office of the President and Vice President worked with the Navajo Area BIA, the Office of Navajo Nation Scholarship and Financial Aid, OMB, and others to finalize a modification to the Higher Education Program contract, to accept an additional \$150,000 in one time funding to help our students. We will continue to advocate for forward funding to avoid these issues in the future.

In 2019, our administration put forth legislation that proposed to set-aside \$50 million from the Síhasin Fund to establish an endowment to create more scholarship opportunities for Navajo students. Unfortunately, the legislation never received a final vote from the Council. The late Chief Manuelito once said, "We have to fight injustices of our people with education," and "education is a ladder" for our Navajo people. Setting aside funds for the education and future of our young Navajo people is the greatest investment we can make to help our children, grandchildren, and generations to come. We ask the 24th Navajo Nation Council to revisit this proposal to create path for education for more of our people.

Several years ago, the Office of the President and Vice President worked closely with Speaker Seth Damon, when he chaired the Budget and Finance Committee, to develop a Permanent Trust Fund Five-Year Plan. The success of that Five-Year Plan resulted in the construction of new travel centers and stores in Shonto, AZ, Dennehotso, AZ, Nahata Dzil, AZ, and Burnside, AZ, and the ongoing development of agriculture and infrastructure projects. Our administration now looks to develop and finalize a new five-year plan with the 24th Navajo Nation Council. We have had initial discussions and plan to move forward with legislation soon and look forward to finalizing the plan in partnership with the Council.

The agenda before the Council this week includes legislation seeking the approval of funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund to purchase property in Washington D.C., which will create a long-term investment, eliminate monthly office rental costs, and elevate the Navajo Nation's presence at the federal level. With this acquisition, the Nation could become the first tribal nation to establish and also establish a lasting footprint near the country's Capitol. With a new administration in the White House, this is an opportunity to further solidify and increase our presence in Washington D.C. We respectfully request your support of the legislation.

We also take this opportunity to thank Mr. Oliver B. Whaley, who stepped down in December as the Executive Director for the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency, to spend more time with his family and to focus on family matters. He was very instrumental in making positive changes related to the remediation of uranium mine sites, advocating for Navajo-owned businesses to conduct environmental clean-ups, and building stronger working relationships with our federal partners. We thank Mr. Whaley and his family and we wish them the very best.

Since then, we have appointed Valinda Shirley to serve as the new Executive Director. Prior to her appointment, she served as the Senior Remedial Project Manager for the Navajo Nation EPA Superfund Program coordinating on-site activities for environmental cleanup or remediation projects to ensure compliance with Navajo Nation and federal environmental laws, standards, regulations, and requirements including Diné Fundamental Law.

With her upbringing, education, and professional experience, we are excited and confident that she will do a great job leading the Navajo Nation EPA. Her traditional upbringing combined with her formal education in biochemistry provides for a unique and very knowledgeable perspective on many issues related to protecting our environment for generations to come. We

welcome her to our administration and look forward to working alongside her. We respectfully request the support of the 24th Navajo Nation Council for her confirmation through Legislation No. 0010-21, sponsored by Council Delegate Kee Allen Begay, Jr.

As we look ahead, our administration remains focused on addressing and mitigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that has required so much of our time and resources over the past year. We also are mindful of the remaining time within the current term and we are looking forward to continue working together with the 24th Navajo Nation Council, as well as our partners at the county, state, and federal levels to move forward on the initiatives outlined in this address.

Our Navajo people pray for us daily for strength, wisdom, protection, and good health. We thank them for supporting all of our leaders. Our way of life teachings handed down from our ancestors teaches us to respect one another. We cannot not allow the divisiveness and actions that we have witnessed play out within our own Nation. Division and misinformation should not guide this Nation. Let us remember our teachings to respect one another and to honor authority.

Together, we face many difficult challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic and with creating a brighter future for the Navajo Nation. With two years left in office, it is incumbent upon us as leaders to work together, to put differences aside, and address the issues that create barriers to progress and create real change. Our ancestors left behind many good teachings, prayers, and values that have withstood the test of time and many adversities. Teachings such as T'áá hwo'ajit'éego, or self-reliance and self-determination, will help us along the way in everything that we strive to help and empower our people. We thank you for the opportunity to present the State of the Navajo Nation Address and we wish you a productive Winter Council Session. May God bless each of you and may God bless the Great Navajo Nation.